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## Amulets in late Roman Italy

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# Amulets in late Roman Italy

**What is an amulet? A working definition:**  
*An object is an amulet if it is worn or deposited deliberately in proximity to its desired zone of influence, and is thought to perform any or all of the following three functions:*

1. Protection from or aversion of harm, disease, misfortune and/or unspecified bad or evil things (i.e. ‘apotropaicism’).
2. Healing or exorcism or removal of evil from a person or place.
3. Bringing success or good fortune to a person or place.

## Methodology - How do we identify an amulet?



The definition above focuses on amulet **function**, not **form**, meaning that we cannot automatically identify surviving objects from the period in question based on it.

However, many shapes, materials, or inscribed images or words were described as amulets in ancient texts, or found elsewhere in archaeological contexts that suggest amuletic use.

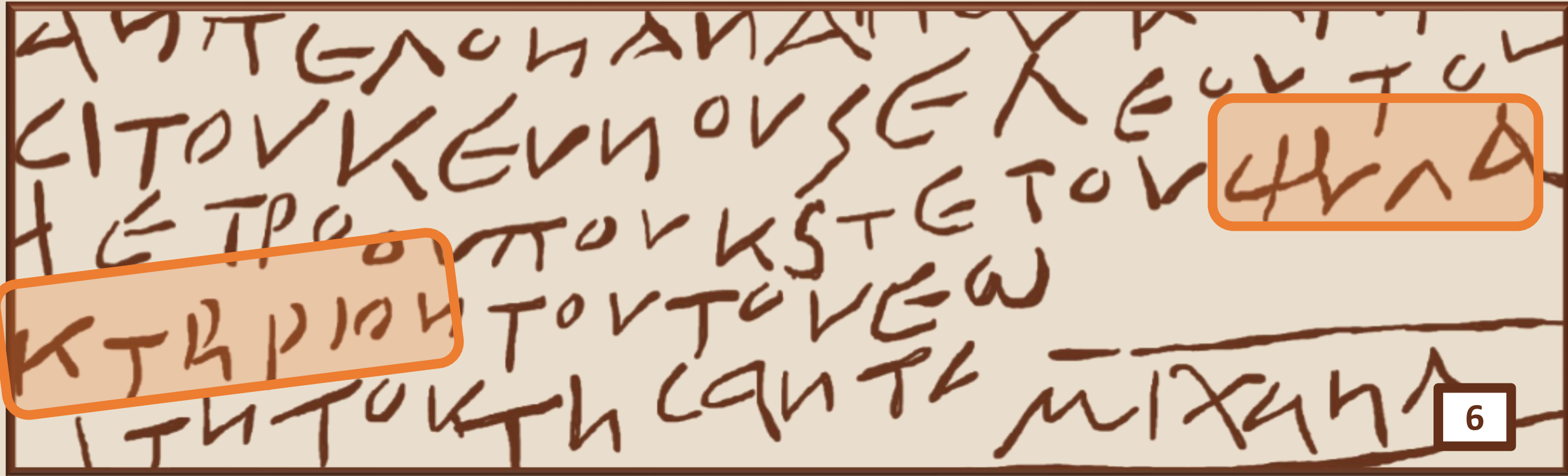
If we use this information carefully and cite it clearly, we can build a case for an individual object’s being considered an amulet.



### Goals:

1. A study of how amulets were used in a new area (late Roman Italy, i.e. 200-700 CE) that has not been investigated exclusively before, by **constructing a database of amulets** from this area.
2. **Exploring these objects with a particular focus on ‘place,’** from objects used with the living body, those associated with the dead body, and those used on buildings or property.
3. **Broadening the definition of ‘amulet’** to include fixed or less portable objects, which reflects Latin and Greek terminology.

**Dimensions:**  
Approximately oval shaped;  
Height – 22.5cm.  
Width – 18cm.  
Depth – 3cm.



### Proposed structure:

#### 1. Amulets and the living body:

- What is the evidence for amulets’ interaction with the living body in archaeology and surviving ancient texts?
- Are trends described by other scholars elsewhere in the ancient world relevant in late antique Italy?

#### 2. Amulets and the grave:

- What objects might have been deposited in graves for amuletic purposes?
- Were they used to protect the dead person or protect the world of the living from the dead person?
- Are there any unusual behaviours specific to late antique Italy?

#### 3. Amulets and buildings or property:

- What evidence is there for protective and fortune-bringing objects or decorations in all building contexts? Does that automatically make them all amulets?
- What does this mean for ancient concepts of personhood? Might that be distributed between a body and its perceived property?

### Case study: an agricultural amulet?

**Findspot:** Field in Modica, southeastern Sicily, circa 1977.

**Date:** 6<sup>th</sup>-7<sup>th</sup> century CE.

This stone (detail pictured left) is inscribed with a Greek text (translated below) calling on inventively named angels to increase the harvest in ‘the vineyard of Peter.’

- It calls itself a **φυλακτήριον** (*phulakterion*), highlighted on the image, a Greek word commonly translated as ‘amulet,’ and implies that the stone had to be close to the area it affected, in this case a vineyard. It was inscribed on both sides, suggesting that it was originally either stood up on its side or that one side was hidden, ‘secret’ writing.
- Tibullus and Virgil (1<sup>st</sup>-century CE Roman poets) and the 7<sup>th</sup>-8<sup>th</sup> century CE compilation known as the *Geoponics* all mention rituals for purifying and protecting farmland that involved walking around the boundaries of the land.
- This stone might therefore have been one of many sat on a boundary of Peter’s land, or a single example that was carried around it and then deposited.

[A] For the harvest, land and holdings, o angel of God, o Kramamila Phinael Louiel Amegaoth Krefiel Phaktoel Anemoul Mou Moukathal louxhanda Eeisdramel, as for you, Jesus Christ, give the harvest and the tribute to the vineyard from fruit, wheat and wine and oil of Peter, where there lies the **amulet** [...] created Michael, Gabriel, Uriel, Raphael, to the Mischotos, the powerful, give favour to the harvest from fruit and grain and wine and oil...

[B] ...the olive grove, the vineyard of Peter, multiply, multiply, now Lord Jesus Christ, yes Amen.

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#### Image captions and credits:

1. Inscribed silver foil sheet, containing invocations to angels to heal and exorcise its owner of headaches. Capua, 4-5<sup>th</sup> c. CE, now at Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples [photo mine].
2. Cylindrical case originally containing above foil, Capua, 4-5<sup>th</sup> c. CE, now at Museo Archeologico Nazionale, Naples [photo mine].
3. Jasper gem in iron setting inscribed with a snake-footed, bird-headed creature. Unknown context, 2-5<sup>th</sup> c. CE. Now at Thorvaldsen Museum. Image (public domain): <https://www.thorvaldsensmuseum.dk/en/collections/work/11679>
4. Gold ‘lunula’ crescent-moon-shaped pendant. Now at Walters Art Museum. Image: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Roman\\_-\\_Necklace\\_with\\_%22Lunula%22\\_-\\_Walters\\_57525\\_-\\_Detail.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Roman_-_Necklace_with_%22Lunula%22_-_Walters_57525_-_Detail.jpg). Shared under [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 3.0 Unported](https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/).
5. Bronze fist-and-phallus pendant. Unknown context, 1<sup>st</sup> c. CE. Now at Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. <https://picryl.com/media/bronze-phallic-amulet-cacff3>. Shared under <https://creativecommons.org/publicdomain/zero/1.0/>.
6. Drawing mine, based on part of photo in Manganaro (1994) fig. 7 and readings in Manganaro (1994) and Bevilacqua/Giannobile (2000).

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